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Postscript: BDS

THIS PROJECT COMES AT A POINT IN TIME WHEN WE ARE OBSERVING a significant growth in the normalization of antisemitism. In academia this is largely the result of the success of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement in mainstreaming the demonization and delegitimization of the state of Israel and in denigrating and ostracizing its supporters. In the United States, the current situation has also been exacerbated because those who support and advocate for BDS feel empowered and emboldened within a highly polarized political environment. In recent years, BDS has succeeded in casting pro-Israel/anti-BDS activism as right-wing and pro-Trump, especially on campuses that have long been dominated by the political and cultural left. This allows every anti-Israel voice to be treated as legitimate, and those who espouse anti-Israel positions can signal their virtue more easily than ever before.

Facts find no room in the world of BDS. The goal of social justice, defined as erasing the alleged racist Jewish state and Zionist ideology, shapes everything related to the study of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More and more, only one set of ideas is presented, in which Israel is held up as the greatest evil—not only in the Middle East but in the world; a state which must be singled out and treated uniquely. Intersectionality, the dominant paradigm in many fields of study in the humanities and softer social sciences, advocates treating oppressions as integrally linked, with the result being increasingly impoverished research designs that further defame Israel with preposterous accusations.¹ For example, in the now popularized “From Ferguson to Palestine” meme, Israel and Jewish-American organizations are condemned for conspiring to cause harm to “black and brown” Palestinian and American bodies via alleged racist U.S.-Israel counterterrorism police exchanges.²

This obsession with Israel’s supposed wrongdoings crowds out other scholarly pursuits—Turkey’s jailing of tens of thousands of fellow academics does not register, much less China’s imprisonment of a million Muslims

in “reeducation” camps. Such comparative analysis, a staple methodology in the social sciences, is dismissed as mere “what-about-ism”. But even the harms meted out to Palestinian academics and students in universities in the West Bank and Gaza receive little attention unless violations to academic freedom can be blamed on Israel’s alleged abuses.³

In place of rigorous scholarship, including field or archival work, buzz words and catchphrases—apartheid, genocide, settler-colonialism, pink-washing—abound. Entire disciplines, including Middle Eastern Studies, Women and Gender Studies, and Ethnic Studies, now rely on these code words wielded by scholar-activists, the vast majority of whom don’t know Hebrew and have spent little time in Israel. In these fields of study, a dangerous perversion of standards of evidence and open inquiry is occurring. The distortion of crucial terms has become so pervasive that we no longer can even recall how they were initially used. Accordingly, reclaiming the language is normatively desirable for better knowledge production. But it also promises to promote greater understanding and tolerance. At a time when the debate over antisemitism has become so intellectualized that individuals have a difficult time distinguishing racism from legitimate criticism of Israeli policy, improving the discourse must be of prime concern.

This becomes all the more imperative given that a “new” racial antisemitism is being built on the “old” medieval one. Cycles of hatred towards Jews reflected in Muslim and Christian writings continue to repeat many old anti-Semitic canards, but are now willing to embrace junk science and social Darwinian tropes whenever possible. What we are witnessing is a slow but steady growth in anti-Jewish animus under the guise of anti-Zionism.⁴ In Europe, there has not been such a level of concern, anxiety, and even depression among European Jewry since 1945. As the late Robert Wistrich, historian of antisemitism writes, “Europe cannot fight anti-Semitism if it appeases terrorists or blackens Israel’s name. We need to insist that a linkage exists between blind ‘Palestinophilia,’ being soft on terror and jihad, defaming Israel, and the current wave of anti-Semitic violence.”⁵ In the United States too, while the situation for Jews is not as dire, antisemitism has increased dramatically on campuses; it has become mainstreamed with repeated incidents now too numerous to count. As French-Jewish intellectual Bernard-Henri Levy recently warned, today open antisemitism is “back, everywhere”.⁶

Throughout history Jews have been subjected to all kinds of segregation, ostracism, and discriminatory boycotting; BDS is but the latest manifestation of this millenarian hate fest. As many of its leaders have openly conceded, the movement is more interested in hurting Israel, if not obliterating it altogether,

than in promoting economic, social, and political rights for Palestinians. BDS singles out for punishment the region's most robust democracy, leaving corrupt and brutal governments in the West Bank and Gaza untouched—and Palestinians living under nondemocratic rule to suffer their fate.⁷ Moreover, Middle Eastern dictatorships that are guilty of the most horrendous atrocities against their own peoples are not targeted for boycott, even though they blatantly deny academic freedom and free speech.⁸ We reject academic boycotts as a matter of principle. It is bizarre that BDS campus activists focus their ire on the one and only place in the Middle East where academics enjoy relatively unrestricted freedom of expression.

The BDS movement has turned the views of individual scholars into political litmus tests. For example, the late Fouad Ajami, an articulate interpreter of Arab culture and politics who taught at Johns Hopkins University, has been subject to scathing attacks from Arab critics such as Asad Abu Khalil (in a review of Ajami's book *The Vanished Imam*). Further, Daniel Pipes noted that the *Nation* asked a Jewish leftist, Andrew N. Rubin, to critique Ajami's book for being too supportive of Israel.⁹ In the United States over the last decades large sums of money from the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have been pumped into the humanities and social sciences through chairs, grants, and fellowships, dictating what Middle East-related courses are taught and the kinds of extracurricular programming that is offered.¹⁰ Strapped for funds and eager to promote international and multicultural studies, many campuses have readily accepted this support despite the implicitly anti-American agendas that they bring. Only on rare occasions are these gifts brought to the public's attention, as was the case in 2004 at the Harvard School of Divinity, which eventually returned a \$2.5m gift from the president of the United Arab Emirates who was funding vicious anti-Semitic groups.¹¹ Studies show the results of this largesse: a large number of Middle Eastern Studies departments and centers that are today top-heavy with virulently anti-Israel and even anti-American programming and that fail to comply with the "viewpoint diversity" standard required for federal grants under Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.¹²

Academia has once again made Jews the canary in the coal mine in the sense that if universities are indicators of social trends, then the normalizing of antisemitism represents a problem for society at large. Today, Jews are called upon to demonstrate their "moral fiber" by using their own Jewish identity as a vehicle to question Israel and its legitimacy, thereby using their Jewishness to passionately make pleas for the Palestinian cause. They are compelled to assert that Jewishness demands pro-Palestinian (and anti-Israel) stances as "progressive" values. Consequently, for Jews on the far Left, as for Arab Palestinians, the events of 1948 are the original sin.

In a 1971 article “The Middle East and Theory of Conflict”, published in the *Journal of Peace Research*, Johan Galtung wrote that “Israel was conceived in sin, born in sin and grew up in sin.” He described the Balfour Declaration (and the UN Partition Proposal) as one of “the most tragic mistakes of recent history”, and blamed Israel for starting and fueling the conflict. His views have not deviated from this but have only become more hostile, not to mention bizarre and conspiratorial. History and culture matter, but Galtung and others demonstrate how, in the hands of intellectuals, “sin” matters more, with so-called academic “peace studies” becoming merely a means to recycle antisemitic conspiracies. Galtung’s approval of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is especially horrendous. Although demonstrated as a forgery, the book continues to circulate throughout the world and has spawned its own spin-offs of Jewish conspiracies in the Muslim and Arab worlds.¹³

Today in a variety of academic disciplines, but especially in the humanities, we see more and more examples, from Rutgers Women’s Studies professor Jasbir Puar, who published an antisemitic blood libel as scholarship (and received an award from a professional organization for her calumnies), to University of Michigan American Studies professor John Cheney-Lippold, who refused to write a letter of recommendation for a student upon learning that he wanted to study in Israel. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict defies a simplistic, monochromatic reading. Absolving Israeli leaders and societal actors from all fault is as ahistorical an account as is placing sole blame on the Jewish state and its people. While it goes without saying that no state is above criticism and that faulting Israel for acts of commission or omission should be a legitimate part of the scholarly enterprise, what we are observing in contrast to this kind of robust inquiry is a suppression of viewpoints. We might call this a “Palestinization” of academia, especially as a result of the enormous influence of the late Palestinian apologist Edward Said.

Said’s *Orientalism* posited the Palestinians as the icon of alleged Western prejudice against the Arab world and Islam in general. Thus, in the post-1967 era the Arab-Israeli conflict was portrayed in this light, with Israel depicted as the latest outpost of Western oppression of non-Europeans.¹⁴ It is this perspective that made it possible for the University of California at Berkeley’s Judith Butler to state that it’s “extremely important” to view Hezbollah and Hamas as social movements that are “progressive, that are on the Left, that are part of the global Left”.¹⁵ It is also what mitigates against accurate accounts of Israel’s quest for peace or thoughtful reflections on what Israel means to Jews in the diaspora.

In response, Bernard Lewis explained the success of Edward Said’s otherwise shoddy, hypothetically disjointed proto-BDS primer, *Orientalism*,

as residing centrally in its author's opportunistic cleverness, directed at transforming a single word, "orientalism"—a term that had always referred simply to an area of academic specialty, one focusing on societies and cultures of the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia—into a term of abuse. As Lewis prophesied, upon its publication, Said's *Orientalism* changed the face of Middle East studies across North America—as in many a Middle East class the Arab-Israeli conflict began to be presented solely through a distorted lens of anti-Zionism. Presenting it otherwise was to position oneself against the community of the good. It was to open oneself up to the charge of racism, anti-Arab prejudice, and "orientalism".

Now, decades later, at a time when not just the study of the Middle East but the humanities and social sciences more broadly are under attack from a corporate America in quest of greater "efficiency" and profits—just as, probably not coincidentally, "functional" illiteracy is well on the way to becoming the "new normal" for nearly half the American population—the academic boycotters are forcing a retreat away from serious engagement of the issues and into anti-intellectual demonology. In so doing, they employ academic freedom as a shield, a kind of "get-out-of-jail-free card" that enables them to continue to field one-sided and biased courses and to publish anti-Israel propaganda in top academic journals and university presses.¹⁶

Of course, the modern notions of free speech and academic freedom stem from John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. Mill argued that free speech originates in society's desire to discover the truth. By vetoing a correct opinion, society loses the opportunity to exchange an error for truth. But banning a false opinion, Mill maintained, means losing something almost as precious—a clearer perception of truth that is produced by its clash with error. If no foes are available to put one's ideas to the test, Mill urges inventing arguments against one's own beliefs. These are the bedrock principles of academia. Yet today the freedom to critique is, predictably, directed mostly at the two Satans, Israel and America, while speech that academics find uncongenial is curtailed via "speech codes" and restrictions on "hate speech". Clearly, academic freedom has become a one-way street, only those having the correct opinions may claim it.

The myriad of ways in which viewpoint diversity is being suppressed in modern academia is beyond the purview of this project. Yet, insofar as they provide alternative perspectives to thinking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the essays collected here do resonate with other efforts to challenge campus orthodoxies. We believe that this endeavor is normatively desirable because no academic enterprise should be allowed to become closed off to

debate, hived off from scrutiny. In this sense, our project speaks to much larger issues and complements other attempts to champion heterodoxy and open inquiry.¹⁷

The essays in this special edition of *Israel Studies* do not make for an easy read, but they are a necessary one. Taken collectively, they expose academic disciplines in which scholars have actually morphed into propagandists, in which lies and innuendo take the place of rigorous research designs, and where shoddy pseudo-academics cast Israel as a malign force trying to deliberately humiliate and “ghettoize Palestinians”. What we see is an abuse of language to defame a people—a wholesale re-description of history that has turned Arabs into innocent victims and Jews into guilty oppressors.¹⁸

This perversion of the academic discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict necessitates a reclaiming of the topic’s language so that complex historical, legal, and political concepts—now merely used by anti-Israel scholar-activists as cudgels to wield against their Zionist colleagues—can once again generate meaningful discussion and rigorous theorizing. The anti-Zionist paradigm has gained a strong foothold in academia, where it fits well with the general trend to virtue signaling and to viewing the world in terms of absolute good and absolute evil. We harbor no illusions that a single collection of essays will lead to the widespread change we need. Nonetheless, we hope that our project will serve as a timely corrective and that it will help to restore a rigor and a richness to the study of the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict that both scholars and students deserve.

NOTES

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18. Mikics, "Ivory Tower Bigots".

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